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Written inflections in L2 production in advanced learners of French

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Inflectional morphology is very hard to acquire in L2, even for learners who have reached an advanced level of L2 (e.g. Bartning 2000). From a psycholinguistic approach, inflection errors made by L2 learners, can be related to locality: agreement processes which are more local in the sentence (e.g. between N and Adj) are mastered earlier than those that are less local (e.g. between N and participle) (*Processability Theory*, Pienemann 1989).

Here, we focus on data from advanced Dutch L1 – French L2 learners to test this locality effect in adjectival inflection. In French, inflection is present both in adjectives and participles; these exhibit agreement with the noun in number and gender. In contrast, inflection in Dutch is only present in adjectives in [+ neuter, + singular, + definite, + attributive] context. In all other contexts no inflection shows up. For Dutch L1 – French L2 learners this typological difference can affect the complexity of the acquisition of French adjectival inflection. If agreement with adjectives is indeed the result of a more local syntactic relation than with participles, this leads to the hypothesis that the first is fully mastered at an advanced level, while the latter is not. We further focused on past participle constructions comparing agreement in dislocation and relative clauses. Here also, differences in locality are expected to lead to different error rates, as agreement in dislocation constructions is known to be more locally than in relative clauses.

In addition to locality, the overt/covert nature of phonological expression of the inflection morpheme has also been related to the error rate of written inflection. Namely, advanced L2 learners seem to use phonological cues in processing inflectional morphology (e.g. Carrasco-Ortiz & Frenck-Mestre 2014). For L1 learners it has been shown that written inflection errors in French are related to the homophonic nature of the inflection morpheme (Largy & Fayol 2001). By testing the effect of locality on the one hand and of ‘audibility’ of the inflection morpheme on the other hand, this study aims to provide new insights with respect to the role of potential syntactic and phonological features on the acquisition of written inflection in advanced L2 learners.

The participants in this study consisted of advanced Dutch L1-French L2 learners who were recruited at a secondary school in The Netherlands. All participants studied French for 6 years at the highest level of Dutch education. The test consisted of a fill-in-the-gap elicitation task covering three conditions: agreement in two lexical categories (adjective (1a) vs. participle (1b)), in utterances with different syntactic complexity (dislocation (2a) vs. relative clause (2b)), and exhibiting differences in ‘audibility’ (inflection morpheme phonologically expressed (3a) or silent (3b)). Participant’s scores were computed as correctness scores per condition.

(1a) La seul _____ période où on est partis, était l’été

(1b) Une page que nous avons lu _____, concerne l’anglais

(2a) Je l’ai arrosé _____, la plante

(2b) La clé que j’avais perdu _____, était celle de ma voiture

(3a) Une remarque que nous avons fait _____ à ce propos, n’a pas résolu le problème

(3b) La boutique qu’on a trouvé _____ au bout de la rue, vend des vêtements de marque

The results show that more inflection errors occur with participles than with adjectives ($t(25) = 9,20$; $p = .000$). Also, participles in relative constructions show more inflection errors than in dislocation constructions ($t(25) = 4,45$; $p = .000$). However, no significant effect was

found for the ‘audibility’ condition, i.e. no more correct responses were found for inflection morphemes that are phonologically expressed, compared to their silent counterparts ($t(25) = .166$; $p = .87$). Based on these findings, we take the effects of locality to be in line with Processability Theory. The fact that no significant effect is found for the ‘audibility’ condition, is in contrast to what has been found for the phonological influence in processing L2 inflectional morphology. Namely, the phonological effect which occurs in processing French inflection, does not in written production of inflection morphemes in L2 French.

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